The Prophetic Commentary of the Qur'ân

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INTRODUCTION

"Praise be to Allah who revealed to His servant the Book and placed therein no crookedness. He has made it straight in order that He may warn of a terrible punishment from him and that He may give glad tidings to the believers who work righteous deeds that they shall have a great reward wherein they shall abide forever. Further, that He may warn those who claim that Allah has begotten a son." [*Sûrah al-Kahf*: 1-4]

May Allah's peace and blessings be upon His Messenger who said: "I was given the Qur'ân and something else like it. I fear lest a man will sit contentedly reclining and say: 'You must follow this Qur'ân. Whatever you find therein permissible, permit it, and whatever you find therein prohibited, forbid it.' Nay, for indeed whatever Allah's Messenger has prohibited, it is as if Allah has prohibited it."[1]

It is one of Allah's blessings upon humanity that He has preserved among them His revealed words without allowing any corruption to alter them. This may indeed be Allah's greatest blessing upon humanity as a whole, since His Book provides them with a way to properly govern their lives and resolve their disputes.

The Qur'ân came to humanity after all the previous revealed scriptures had either been lost or, like the *Torah* and the *Gospel*, corrupted. Allah speaks about how people had corrupted the scriptures, saying: "Woe to those who write the Book with their own hands and then say: 'This is from Allah' to gain from it a paltry price. So woe to them for what their hands have written and woe to them for what they gain from it." [*Sûrah al-Baqarah*: 79]

If the Qur'ân is Allah's greatest blessing upon humanity, it follows that knowledge of the commentary and interpretation of the Qur'ân is the greatest of all knowledge, since it is the knowledge that gives humanity a correct understanding of what Allah is saying to them. This is why scholars throughout history have given this field of study so much attention and have written so extensively about it.

The commentary of the Qur'ân began at the time of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Indeed, the Prophet (peace be upon him) is the primary source for explaining Allah's Book. He explained the meanings of the Qur'ân's verses by his words and by his deeds.

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[1] *Musnad Ahmad* (17174), *Sunan al-Dârimî* (606), *Sunan Abî Dâwûd* (4594), *Sunan al-Tirmidhî* (2664), and *Sunan Ibn Mâjah* (12).

In this short treatise, we shall investigate this prophetic commentary of the Qur'ân. This investigation will be organized into the following chapters:

- **Chapter One**: Special qualities of the Qur'ân
- **Chapter Two:** Muslim efforts in interpreting the Qur'ân
- **Chapter Three:** How the Prophet conveyed the Qur'ân
- **Chapter Four:** The commentary of the Companions
- **Chapter Five:** How the Sunnah explains the Qur'ân

CHAPTER ONE
Special Qualities of the Qur'ân

Without a doubt, the most salient feature of the Qur'ân is that it is Allah's word. Allah says: "It is indeed a mighty Book. Falsehood cannot approach it from before it or from behind it. It is revelation from one who is wise and worthy of praise." [*Sûrah Fussilat*: 41-42]

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "The Qur'ân has the distinction over all other speech that Allah has over His Creation."[2]

It is sufficient that the Qur'ân is the speech of Allah. It needs no other special distinction after that. However, I feel that it is necessary for the purpose of this treatise for me to point out three more remarkable qualities of Allah's Book.

1. The first of these distinctive features is that the Qur'ân has been perfectly preserved. Allah says: "Indeed, We have revealed the Remembrance, and indeed We shall be its protector." [*Sûrah al-Hijr*: 9]

Since the time it was revealed, Allah has preserved the Qur'ân in the hearts of the people and in writing. It had been committed to memory by the Companions and by every generation that came after them. The care paid by the Muslims in accurately recording and memorizing the Qur'ân has been phenomenal. Every letter and vowel mark indicating every mode of reciting the *Qur'ân* has been preserved without the least addition or subtraction.

Al-Qurtubî and some other scholars of Qur'ânic commentary mention an interesting story regarding the preservation of the *Qur'ân*:

The Caliph al-Ma`mûn used to convene intellectual gatherings. One of these meetings was attended by a man wearing beautiful clothing, possessing a handsome face, and followed by a sweet fragrance. He spoke in a most eloquent manner. When the meeting

[2] *Sunan al-Dârimî* (3399), *Sunan al-Tirmidhî* (2926), and al-Bayhaqî in *Shu`ab al-Îmân* (2015). Al-Tirmidhî graded it as a good but unusual hadîth (*hasan gharîb*), but its chain of transmission contains some weakness.

was adjourned, al-Ma'mûn summoned this man and asked him: "Are you from the Israelites?" He replied that he was. Al-Ma'mûn said: "Accept Islam and I shall arrange good things for you." Al-Ma'mûn made him a number of promises.

The man merely replied "My religion and the religion of my forefathers" and went away.

A year later, he returned as a Muslim. He spoke about matters of Islamic Law in a most proficient manner. When the meeting was adjourned, al-Ma'mûn again summoned him and said: "Are you not the man who was with us before?" He replied that he was. Al-Ma'mûn then asked him what had prompted him to accept Islam.

He replied: "When I left your presence, I wished to put these religions to the test. And you indeed regard me a man of keen intellect. So I turned my attention to the *Torah*. I produced three copies of it, each time adding and deleting some things from it. Then I took these copies to the place of prayer and they were purchased from me.

"I then turned my attention to the *Gospel* and drafted three copies of it, each time adding and deleting some things from it. Then I took these copies to the church and they were purchased from me.

"I then turned my attention to the Qur'ân and drafted three copies of it, each time adding and deleting some things from it. Then I took these copies to the copyists and they skimmed through them. When they found the additions and deletions that I had made, they threw them aside and did not purchase them. So I came to know that this is a protected book, and this is the reason that I accepted Islam."[3]

2. The second distinctive feature is that the Qur'ân is complete and comprehensive. Allah says about the Qur'ân that it is "…a detailed exposition of all things" [*Sûrah Yûsuf*: 111]

There is no matter that humanity needs to know about in their religion or their worldly life without the Qur'ân discussing it. It does so by mentioning it directly, or by providing a general principle that covers it, or by referring to another source like the Sunnah, juristic consensus, or juristic analogy.

In this way, every issue of this world and the next that concerns people individually or collectively is dealt with, from matters of faith and morality to social, political, and economic concerns. It is all found in the Qur'ân. If it is not mentioned specifically, then it is covered as part of something broader.

The Qur'ân provides the essential teachings of faith and law and embraces in its comprehensiveness all the affairs of human life.

[3] *Tafsîr al-Qurtubî* (10/5-6)

3. The third distinctive feature is that the Qur'ân is the absolute, indisputable truth. Allah says: "This is the Book wherein there is no doubt, a guide for those who fear Allah." [*Sûrah al-Baqarah*: 2]

Whatever the Qur'ân says about the past, present, and future is true. It is absolutely impossible for the Qur'ân to be in contradiction with the actualities of the world, whether the historical events of the past or the scientific discoveries of the future.

We assert without the least hesitation on the basis of our faith in Allah that everything the Qur'ân says about the nations of the past, the happenings of the future, the stories of the Prophets, the physical realities of the universe, and the human soul are all true. For this reason, we know that it is impossible for science to come with a fact that contradicts with the Qur'ân. Whoever claims that there is a scientific fact that contradicts with the Qur'ân is either misunderstanding the Qur'ân or the scientific concepts in question.

Such a contradiction is impossible, because the one who revealed the Qur'ân is the one who created the universe and everything within it. It is not possible that Allah will say anything about His Creation except the absolute truth. Allah says: "Should He who created not know? And He is the knower of subtleties, the All-Aware." [*Sûrah al-Mulk*: 14]

Just as we can be sure that what the Qur'an informs us about is undoubtedly true, we can be equally sure that what the Qur'ân legislates for us is undoubtedly just. Allah says: "The word of your Lord is fulfilled in truth and justice." [*Sûrah al-An`âm*: 115] This means that it is true in what it informs us of and just in what it legislates for us.

The blessing of the Qur'an

The Qur'ân is the criterion and the scale of reference for all disputes and disagreements in matters of religion. We can appreciate the great blessing that Allah has given us in preserving the Qur'ân up to our time. It is the greatest of blessings bestowed upon the Muslims, and indeed upon all humanity.

We can show our thanks for this blessing by allowing the Qur'ân to govern our lives, our families, and our societies. The Qur'ân should be referred to in all of our affairs. If we fail to do so, we will be showing ingratitude for this greatest of blessings. The punishment for this ingratitude is a painful one indeed. It is that the Qur'ân will be taken away from us and not a trace of it will be left on Earth.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "Islam will be obliterated just like a stain is washed out of a garment. Fasting, prayer, the pilgrimage rites, and charity will be unknown. Allah's Book will be lifted up on a night so that not even a verse of it will remain on Earth."[4] The Qur'ân shall be removed from the hearts of men and from the pages on which it is written because it will cease to be acted upon and benefited from.

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[4] *Sunan Ibn Mâjah* (4049), *Mustadrak al-Hâkim* (8460), and al-Bayhaqî's *Shu`ab al-Îmân* (2028).

Out of respect for His words, Allah will lift it away from those who ignore it and deny it the recognition that it deserves.

CHAPTER TWO
Muslim Efforts in Interpreting the Qur'ân

The Qur'ân was revealed to the Prophet (peace be upon him) and his Companions learned it from him. They, in turn, taught it to the Muslims who came after them. The Muslims showed the Qur'ân the utmost care and concern. This is no more evident than in the care that they showed in the interpretation of the Qur'ân.

The efforts of the Companions in interpreting and explaining the Qur'ân

The Companions were very concerned with the correct understanding of the Qur'ân. Some of them became well known for their knowledge in this area, having devoted their lives to this endeavor. The following Companions are the most notable among them:

`Abd Allah b. `Abbâs. He was known as *Hibr al-Ummah* (Scribe of the Muslim Nation) and *Tarjumân al-Qur'ân* (Interpretor of the Qur'ân). He was the foremost of all the commentators of the Qur'ân. The Prophet (peace be upon him) had made the following supplication on his behalf: "O Allah, give him understanding of the religion and teach him the interpretation of the Qur'ân."[5]

Numerous statements regarding the commentary and interpretation of Qur'ânic verses have been related from him. He was one of the four people who had compiled the entire Qur'ân together during the Prophet's lifetime and he was one of the most important reciters of the Qur'ân from among the Companions.

`Abd Allah b. Mas`ûd. The Prophet (peace be upon him) had said: "Take the Qur'ân from four people: Ibn Mas`ûd, Mu`âdh b. Jabal, Ubayy b. Ka`b, and Sâlim the ward of Abû Hudhayfah."[6]

`Abd Allah b. Mas`ûd said: "I swear by Allah; indeed I have taken from the lips of Allah's Messenger over seventy chapters of the Qur'ân. And by Allah, the Companions know that I am among the most knowledgeable among them concerning Allah's book, though I am not the best of them."

The person who related this statement of Ibn Mas`ûd follows it with the following comment: "I sat in study circles and listened to what the people were saying and never heard anyone respond by saying anything to the contrary."[7]

`Abd Allah b. Mas`ûd also said: "I swear by Allah besides whom there is no other God; no verse of Allah's Book has been revealed except that I know the circumstances in

[5] *Sahîh al-Bukhârî* (143) and *Sahîh Muslim* (2477).
[6] *Sahîh Muslim* (2464).
[7] *Sahîh al-Bukhârî* (5000) and *Sahîh Muslim* (2462).

which it was revealed. If I had known anyone else more knowledgeable about Allah's Book than me who could be reached by camel, I would have mounted a camel and gone to him."[8]

Other Companions who made significant contributions to Qur'ânic commentary were `Alî, Ubayy b. Ka`b, and `Abd Allah b. `Umar.

In his *Muwatta'*, Mâlik narrates that Ibn `Umar devoted eight years to the study of *Sûrah al-Baqarah*, the first and longest chapter of the Qur'ân.[9] When he completed it, he offered a camel in sacrifice to Allah as a token of gratitude.

He had studied both the words and the meanings of *Sûrah al-Baqarah*, committing its understanding to memory along with its recitation. It takes an average student today a few weeks to a month to commit *Sûrah al-Baqarah* to memory, whereas Ibn `Umar, the eminent Companion, took eight years to do so, because he committed to his knowledge along with the words of the Qur'ân the meaning and proper understanding of the text.

The efforts of the Successors in interpreting and explaining the Qur'ân

The Successors, those who learned from the Companions, acquired from them the knowledge of Qur'ânic commentary. Among their number were some of the greatest scholars in the field, like Mujâhid b. Jâbir al-Makkî, about whom Sufayan al-Thawrî said: "If you get the commentary of the Qur'ân from Mujâhid, it will be enough for you."[10]

There is nothing at all surprising about this, since Mujâhid was a student of none other than Ibn `Abbâs. He said: "I read the Qur'ân to Ibn `Abbâs three times from beginning to end, stopping upon each verse."[11]

Among the many other Successors who were known for the commentary of the Qur'ân were Qatadah, `Ikrimah, al-Suddî.

The written compilation of the commentary of the Qur'ân

Thereafter, eminent scholars committed the commentary of the Qur'ân to writing. Thousands of commentaries on the Qur'ân were written employing a variety of approaches. Specialists in the Arabic language wrote commentaries examining the language, grammar, and linguistic style of the Qur'ân. Scholars of Islamic Law wrote books focusing on the verses of the Qur'ân that deal with legal rulings and what they indicate and the differences of opinion among jurists regarding these indications. Scholars of hadîth wrote books wherein they collected together the various narrations that discuss the meanings of the verses of the Qur'ân.

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[8] *Sahîh al-Bukhârî* (5002) and *Sahîh Muslim* (3463).
[9] *Al-Muwatta'* (477).
[10] Refer to *Tafsîr Ibn Kathîr* (1/6)
[11] *Tabaqât Ibn Sa`d* (2/395), *Musannaf Ibn Abî Shaybah* (30287), *Sunan al-Dârimî* (1160), *Tafsîr al-Tabarî* (2/395), and *Mustadrak al-Hâkim* (3105).

Specialists in every field lent their particular expertise to the body of literature known as Qur'ânic commentary. There can be no doubt that these books vary widely in their quality and value. Indeed, some commentaries were written merely to advance the particular ideas of their authors with little regard for objectivity.

The sect known as the Mu`tazilah are a good case in point. Some of their authors wrote commentaries on the Qur'ân in order to promote their false ideology. This is evident in the commentaries written by al-Qâdî `Abd al-Jabbâr and al-Zamakhsharî. In both of these works, every attempt is made to turn the Qur'ân into an argument for Mu`tazilî teachings.

Some scholastic theologians did the same thing by interpreting the Qur'ân in order to advance their own opinions. We can see this in the works of al-Razî', al-Mâturîdî, and others.

Likewise, Sufi mystics produced commentaries to support their mystical ideas, like the commentary of Abû `Abd al-Rahmân al-Sulamî.

There have been scholars of Islamic Law who interpreted verses of the Qur'ân to support their own legal opinions as well as their preferences among the legal verdicts of other jurists.

There have also been a number of scientifically minded people, especially in recent years, who have tried to make the Qur'ân indicate scientific ideas that it simply does not indicate. This is the case with Tantâwî's commentary *al-Jawâhir*. This book contains everything save Qur'ânic commentary. It is more a book of astronomy, physics, biology, and geology and contains virtually nothing of Qur'ânic commentary.

This is a common tendency among advocates of an idea referred to as "the scientific miracle of the Qur'ân". Some of the proponents of this idea have gone to extremes in distorting the interpretation of certain verses to indicate meanings that are simply not being indicated by those verses. They do so hoping to demonstrate that the Qur'ân anticipated certain modern scientific discoveries – and even some unproven hypotheses.

CHAPTER THREE
How the Prophet (peace be upon him) Conveyed the Qur'ân

These differences that exist in the interpretation of the Qur'ân make it necessary for a Muslim who sincerely wishes to know the true meaning of Allah's Book to go back to the original source and unadulterated wellspring of this knowledge. This source is none other than the Prophet's authentic Sunnah. This is the best source for the proper understanding of the Qur'ân, because the Prophet (peace be upon him) was the one commanded by Allah to communicate the Qur'ân to us.

Allah says the following in this regard:

"Your duty is but to convey the Message." [*Sûrah al-Shûrâ*: 48]

"Do not move your tongue in haste with it. Indeed, it is upon Us to bring it together and recite it. So when We recite it, follow attentively its recitation. Then it is upon Us to expound it." [*Sûrah al-Qiyâmah*: 16-19]

"O Messenger! Convey what has been sent down to you from your Lord. If you do not do so, you will not have conveyed His Message." [*Sûrah al-Mâ'idah*: 67]

Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) was commanded to convey the Message and to explain it. What exactly, we may ask, does this entail? It actually entails quite a number of things, which can be enumerated as follows:

1. Conveyance of the words of the Qur'ân

It was the duty of the Prophet (peace be upon him) to convey the words of the Qur'ân exactly as they were revealed to him without any alteration, addition, or omission.

Allah says: "Indeed, Allah conferred a great blessing upon the believers when He sent among them a Messenger from among themselves reciting unto them His signs, purifying them, and teaching them the Book and the Wisdom, while before that they had been in manifest error." [*Sûrah Al `Imrân*: 164] The statement "reciting unto them His signs" refers to the actual words of the Qur'ân.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) showed the utmost care and concern for conveying the words of the Qur'ân. Ibn `Abbâs, while explaining the meaning of the verses of Sûrah al-Qiyâmah quoted above, shows us just how concerned the Prophet (peace be upon him) was:

> "Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) used to be seriously taxed when receiving revelation and he would follow along with it by moving his lips, so Allah revealed: 'Do not move your tongue in haste with it. Indeed, it is upon Us to bring it together and recite it.' – meaning 'We will bring it together in your heart and then you should recite it' – 'So when We recite it, follow attentively its recitation.' – meaning: 'Llisten and be silent, and then it will be upon Us that you will be able to recite it.'
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> Thereafter, Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) would listen when the angel Gabriel came to him. Then when Gabriel departed, he would recite it just as it was recited to him."[12]

This faithful communication of the words of the Qur'ân was part of what Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) was commanded by his Lord to convey to humanity. There is no doubt that he conveyed the words of the Qur'ân to us accurately and completely and that he did not conceal anything that was revealed to him.

If the Prophet (peace be upon him) were to have concealed any verse of the Qur'ân, it would have been: "And recall when you said to the one who had received Allah's favor

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[12] *Sahîh al-Bukhârî* (7524) and *Sahîh Muslim* (448).

and your favor: Retain your wife (in marriage) and fear Allah.' And you were hiding in your heart what Allah was about to make manifest. You were fearing the people, but it is more fitting that you should fear Allah." [*Sûrah al-Ahzâb*: 37]

This verse censures Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) in the sharpest manner. Nevertheless, Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) had to dutifully recited this verse to the people, both within prayer and outside of it.

He would also have had reason to conceal "He (the Prophet) frowned and turned away when the blind man approached him. And what could tell you but that perhaps he might become purified or that he might receive admonition and that the admonition might benefit him? As for the one who regards himself as self-sufficient, he is the one to whom you give your attention, though it is not upon you if he does not become purified. But as for him who came to you earnestly and with humility, of him you were unmindful." [*Sûrah `Abasa*: 1-10]

Though these verses rebuke the Prophet (peace be upon him) in the harshest of terms, he recited them to the people just as they were revealed to him.

Allah chose Muhammad (peace be upon him) for His Message above all humanity, and Allah says: "Allah best knows with whom to entrust His Message." [*Sûrah al-An`âm*: 124] He chose a man whom He knew would not conceal anything that was revealed to him, even those verses that scolded and censured him. Allah chose a man who would convey those verses just as faithfully as the verses that praised him.

He would recite to the people Allah's praises for him, like "He is upon a most exalted standard of conduct." [*Sûrah al-Qalam*: 4] and "Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, and those who are with him are severe upon the unbelievers and merciful among themselves. You see them bowing and in prostration seeking Allah's favor and His pleasure." [*Sûrah al-Fath*: 29] Yet with equal ease he would recite the verses that scolded him and censured him.

2. Conveyance of the meaning of the Qur'ân

Though he took great care to convey the words of the Qur'ân faithfully, he did not suffice with that. He made equally certain to explain to the people the meaning of those words. In fact, the task of explaining the meaning of Allah's book is cited in the Qur'ân itself as being part of the Prophet's duty. This is why Allah says: "Then it is upon Us to expound it." [*Sûrah al-Qiyâmah*: 19] after saying "Do not move your tongue in haste with it. Indeed, it is upon Us to bring it together and recite it." Allah is saying here that it is upon Him to explain to His Messenger (peace be upon him) the meaning of what He is revealing to him of the Qur'ân's words.

After Allah says: "Indeed, Allah conferred a great blessing upon the believers when He sent among them a Messenger from among themselves reciting unto them His signs…" He immediately follows it by saying "…purifying them…" [*Sûrah Al `Imrân*: 164] This

purification means that Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) developed the character of his Companions upon the teachings of the Qur'ân. The Qur'ân was transformed within their personalities from a mere written word into a practical and vital expression of life in the real world.

It has been said about the Companions of the Prophet (peace be upon him) that each of them was like a Qur'ân walking on the Earth. This is not hard to accept, for when `Â'ishah, the Prophet's wife, was asked to describe her husband's character, she said to her questioner: "Do you read the Qur'ân?" When her questioner responded in the affirmative, she said: "The character of the Prophet (peace be upon him) was the Qur'ân."[13]

When Allah speaks about the Prophet (peace be upon him) purifying those to whom he came, he is talking about how the Prophet (peace be upon him) taught them proper beliefs, lofty moral values, nobility of conduct, and what they needed to prepare them for the role of leading humanity which was required of them.

After saying all of this, Allah continues by saying: "…and teaching them the Book and the Wisdom". This begs us to ask the question: What is the book being referred to and what is meant by "the Wisdom"?

The famous jurist, al-Shâfi`î, provides the following answer to this question:

> Allah says: "And recite what is rehearsed to you in your homes of Allah's signs and of the Wisdom. Truly Allah is the Subtle, the All-Aware." [*Sûrah al-Ahzâb*: 34]
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> Allah makes reference to His Book which is the Qur'ân. He also mentions the Wisdom, which, according to what I have heard from those whose knowledge of the Qur'ân I am pleased with, refers to the Sunnah of Allah's Messenger."[14]

Therefore, we must consider closely Allah's statement: "Indeed, Allah conferred a great blessing upon the believers when He sent among them a Messenger from among themselves reciting unto them His signs, purifying them, and teaching them the Book and the Wisdom, while before that they had been in manifest error." [*Sûrah Al `Imrân*: 164]

When we do so, we can see that it starts off by stating how Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) conveyed to his Companions the words of the Qur'ân. Then, once they had committed these words to memory, he would take them to the next level by "teaching them the Book", explaining to them the meaning of those words. He would go even further by "purifying them", shaping their personalities and conduct in accordance with the Qur'ân's teachings.

One of the students of the Companions spoke about how he learned from them, saying: "Those among the Companions of the Prophet (peace be upon him) who taught us the

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[13] *Sahîh Muslim* (746).
[14] al-Shâfi`î, *al-Risâlah*, pp. 77-78.

Qur’ân told us that they used to learn ten verses at a time from Allah’s Messenger (peace be upon him). They would not take from him another ten until after they learned the knowledge that those verses contained and how to put what they learned into practice.”[15]

The duty of the Prophet (peace be upon him) was to convey the text of the Qur’ân along with its meaning. Indeed, it was a duty that he carried out most admirably.

CHAPTER FOUR
The Commentary of the Companions

The Prophet’s Companions were for the most part Arabs. They knew the Arabic language instinctively. By merely hearing Arabic speech, they knew exactly what the speaker intended. Likewise, the unbelievers of Mecca knew the Arabic language and knew in general terms what the Qur’ân was saying.

Allah says: “Truly it is revelation from the Lord of All the Worlds, brought down by the Trustworthy Spirit (Gabriel) to your heart – so you could give admonition – in the clear Arabic tongue.” [*Sûrah al-Shu`arâ’*: 192-195]

Allah says: “And we never sent a Messenger with other than the language of his people.” [*Sûrah Ibrâhîm*: 4]

The Arabs – even the unbelievers among them – understood in general what the Qur’ân was saying to them. This is why so many of them rejected it when it spoke contrary to their vain desires and vested interests.

They likewise understood the meaning of the Arabic declaration “*Lâ ilâha illâ Allah*” (There is no God but Allah). So when they heard the Prophet (peace be upon him) say “O people! Say that there is no God but Allah”, they fully appreciated that it meant there was to be no worship meted out to anyone besides Allah alone and that only Allah deserves to be worshipped. This is why they rejected it so decisively, saying: “Has he made the gods into one God? This is something strange indeed!” [*Sûrah Sâd*: 5]

Muhammad b. `Abd al-Wahhâb compared some of the Muslims of today to the polytheists of old, saying: “Those people of old were more aware of the meaning of ‘There is no God but Allah’ than those who claim to be Muslims today.”

The leaders of the polytheists like Abû Jahl and Abû Lahab knew the Arabic language and what it means. By contrast, many Muslims today – and indeed for many generations – declare “*Lâ ilâha illâ Allah*” without understanding its true meaning the way those pagans of old understood it. Many Muslims today assume that the statement “There is no God but Allah” simply means that there is no Creator and Provider apart from Allah. This

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[15] *Musannaf Ibn Abî Shaybah* (29929).

is only part of its meaning. However, its true meaning – the one that the pagans of Mecca so violently rejected – is that Allah alone must receive our worship.

The Companions were Arabs of their day and understood the Arabic language. They understood most of what the Qur'ân was saying merely by having the Prophet (peace be upon him) recite it to them.

Likewise, the Arabs of today understand a reasonable portion of the Qur'ân without having to refer back to books of commentary. When the Qur'ân discusses things like Paradise, Hell, the Messengers, and matters of inheritance, an Arab understands immediately what is being said. The Companions who lived at the time the Qur'ân was being revealed, likewise understood much more than that.

Reasons why the Companions differed in their understanding of the Qur'ân

The Companions understood the Qur'ân better than anyone else. In spite of this, they differed among themselves in their understanding of the Qur'ân for various reasons. This is why they would go to the Prophet (peace be upon him) and ask him about matters they needed to have clarified and He would explain these matters to them.

Among the reasons for their disagreements were the following:

1. Varying degrees of intellectual ability and insightfulness. Allah bestows upon His servants varying degrees of reason and intelligence. Some people are blessed to be geniuses and others have lesser intellectual powers bestowed upon them.

All of the Companions of the Prophet (peace be upon him) enjoyed a certain minimum degree of knowledge of the Qur'ân. However, beyond this common knowledge, many Companions had much more, and to varying degrees.

\`Alî was once asked: "Do you know anything of the revelation besides what is in Allah's Book?"

He replied: "I swear by Him who cleaves the seed open and creates life, I know nothing save an understanding of the Qur'ân that Allah bestows upon a man and what is written on that scroll." He pointed to a scroll that he had hanging from his sword.

His questioner asked him what was written on the scroll. He replied: "Matters of blood money and of freeing a slave and the ruling that a Muslim should not be killed in retribution for the death of an unbeliever."[16]

\`Alî had said: "...an understanding of the Qur'ân that Allah bestows upon a man...", indicating that some of the Companions were blessed with more of an understanding than others.

[16] *Sahîh al-Bukhârî* (3047) and *Sahîh Muslim* (1370).

Ibn `Abbâs had once placed for the Prophet (peace be upon him) water for him to use for purification. The Prophet (peace be upon him) asked: “Who is it that placed this here?”

The people informed him that it was Ibn `Abbâs who had done so. At that time, Ibn `Abbâs was a pre-pubescent boy. The Prophet (peace be upon him) was impressed with the boy’s knowledge, intelligence, and good manners and made the following supplication to Allah on his behalf: “O Allah, give him understanding of the religion and teach him the interpretation of the Qur’ân.”[17]

Ibn `Abbâs enjoyed an unsurpassable knowledge of the Qur’ân. Many stories and narrations have reached us about the excellence of his knowledge. Perhaps one of the most amazing of these is what took place between him and a Khârijite named Nâfi` b. al-Azraq al-Khârijî.

Nâfi` b. al-Azraq had asked Ibn `Abbâs a series of questions about the Qur’ân. Each time Ibn `Abbâs gave him an answer, Nâfi` would challenge him by saying: “Do the Arabs know this in their language?” Ibn `Abbâs would say “Yes, they do” then go on to prove it by citing from memory literary precedents from verses of Arabic poetry. This showed how extensive and remarkable his knowledge was.

The Companions had different degrees of knowledge and consequently disagreed in their understanding of the meanings of many verses. Sometimes a Companion would even misunderstand what a certain verse was speaking about, as we shall discuss shortly.

2. Differences in their understanding of the Arabic language. Though they were Arabs, some of them had a more extensive vocabulary and a deeper knowledge of the subtleties of the Arabic language than others.

For instance, `Umar b. Al-Khattâb recited from the Qur’ân: “And we split open the Earth and produce therein corn and grapes and herbs and olives and dates and enclosed gardens with lofty trees and fruits and *abb*.” [*Sûrah `Abasa*: 26-31] Then he said, regarding the last verse: “We know what fruits are but what is *abb*?” Then he thought to himself and said: “By Allah, this is indeed burdensome, O `Umar!”[18]

Abû Bakr also asked about the same verse and lamented: “What land could shelter me and what sky could shade me if I were to dare say about Allah’s Book what I do not know?”[19]

This shows that the Companions differed in their knowledge of the Arabic language. They likewise disagreed in their understanding of the intended meaning of certain verses. For instance, when `Adî b. Hâtim heard the verse “…so eat and drink until the white

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[17] *Sahîh al-Bukhârî* (143) and *Sahîh Muslim* (2477).
[18] *Tafsîr al-Tabarî* (30/59-61). The word *abb* is an Arabic word referring to plants that are used as fodder for livestock.
[19] *Musannaf Ibn Abî Shaybah* (30103) and al-Khatîb al-Baghdâdî, *al-Jâmi` li Âdâb al-Râwî wa Akhlâq al-Sâmi`* (2/193).

thread becomes distinct to you from the black thread of dawn…" [*Sûrah al-Baqarah*: 187], he understood it to mean actual threads of cloth. So when he went to sleep that evening, he placed a black thread and a white thread beneath his pillow. When he woke up to take his morning meal before starting his fast, he placed those threads beside him and continued to look at them while he ate until the sky became bright enough for him to distinguish the black thread from the white thread.

Later on that day, he went to Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) and informed him of what he had done. The Prophet (peace be upon him) explained to him the meaning of the black thread and the white thread referred to in the verse, saying: "That only refers to the blackness of the night and the whiteness of the day. So if the light of dawn becomes visible to you, stop eating."[20]

This shows how the Companions could differ in understanding the intended meaning of Allah's words. In the Arabic language, it is possible to understand the black thread and the white thread to mean actual cotton threads. The language also allows for these phrases to indicate night and day. \`Adî had understood the first meaning, so the Prophet (peace be upon him) explained to him that the second meaning was actually intended. There is no doubt that the other Companions did not understand the verse in the way that Adî had understood it, since they did not do what he had done.

3. Differences in their knowledge of historical events, happenings, and other types of knowledge that contribute to the understanding of the Qur'ân. Al-Mughîrah b. Shu\`bah relates that the Prophet (peace be upon him) had sent him to the Christians of Najrân to call them to Islam and to teach them. One of the things that al-Mughîrah informed them about was the verse of the Qur'ân describing what the people exclaimed when they saw Mary carrying a child: "O sister of Aaron, Your father was not a man of evil nor your mother an unchaste woman!" [*Sûrah Maryam*: 28]

When the Christians of Najrân heard this verse, they objected: "O Mughîrah, how can you call her 'the sister of Aaron when many centuries had passed between her time and that of Aaron?"

Al-Mughîrah was confused and did not know what to say, so he returned to the Prophet (peace be upon him) and asked him about it. The Prophet (peace be upon him) replied: "They used to call each other by the names of their Prophets and the names of the pious people who came before them."

The Prophet (peace be upon him) solved the problem that al-Mughîrah had in understanding the Qur'ân. The Aaron being referred to was not the brother of Moses (peace be upon him) but another Aaron. This was something common, because the Jews used to give their children the names of the prophets and other pious people of aforetime, and Moses and Aaron were among those names.

[20] *Sahîh al-Bukhârî* (1916) and *Sahîh Muslim* (1090).

Had al-Mughîrah known this fact, he would not have had to ask the Prophet (peace be upon him) about it. However, when the Christians brought the matter to his attention, he had no answer for them and he had to return to the Prophet (peace be upon him) for the answer.

CHAPTER FIVE
How the Sunnah Explains the Qur'ân

Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) explained in his Sunnah everything of the Qur'ân that needed to be explained. The question is: Does this mean that he explained all of the Qur'ân or only part of it?

Scholars have differed on this matter. Some, like al-Suyûtî, have expressed the opinion that he had to explain very little of the Qur'ân. Their opinion is based on the *hadîth* where `Â'ishah supposedly said: "The Prophet (peace be upon him) did not explain anything of the Qur'ân with his opinion save for a few verses."[21] However, this *hadîth* is unauthentic on account of its defective chain of transmission. One of its narrators is Ja`far al-Zubayrî, a weak narrator whose *hadîth* cannot be relied upon.

Other scholars claim that Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) explained the Qur'ân in its entirety. They mean that he explained all of the Qur'ân that could possibly need explanation, since there are verses of the Qur'ân that require no explanation at all.

Ibn `Abbâs said: "The explanation of the Qur'ân has four aspects to it. The first aspect comprises what is known by the Arabs by virtue of their language. When it is recited to the Arabs, they understand it. Then there are the explanations that no one is excused for not knowing. This includes the explanation of the verses related to Islamic legal injunctions and beliefs that people need to know. Then there are the explanations that are known only to scholars. These are subtle meanings that most people do not grasp. Then there are matters whose explanation is known only to Allah. These are the four aspects of the explanation of the Qur'ân."[22]

In short, Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) explained in his Sunnah everything of the Qur'ân that needed explaining. The Sunnah is, in essence, the commentary of the Qur'ân, and it explains the Qur'ân in four ways:

1. Verbal (textual) explanation of the Qur'ân

This is where the Prophet (peace be upon him) explains the Qur'ân by stating what it means. This is quite common in the Sunnah. Scholars have produced volumous works devoted to compiling these statements together, such as the commentaries of the Qur'ân

[21] Al-Bazzâr as stated in *Majma` al-Zawa'id* (6/303), Sunan Abî Ya'lâ (4528), *Târikh Baghdâd* (13/253), and Ibn al-Qaysarânî in *al-Mu'talaf wa al-Mukhtalaf* (1/171).
[22] *Tafsîr al-Tabarî.*

compiled by `Abd b. Humayd, Ibn Mardawayh, Ibn Abî Hâtim, and al-Tabarî. The scholar al-Suyûtî compiled a great deal of these hadîth together in his work *al-Durr al-Manthûr fî Tafsîr al-Ma'thûr*.

Many compilations of the Sunnah contain chapters devoted to the explanation of the Qur'ân. For example, an entire volume of Ibn Athîr's encyclopedic compilation of six major Sunnah books entitled *Jâmi` al-`Usûl* is devoted to statements related from the Prophet (peace be upon him) that explain the Qur'ân. The six Sunnah books that he brings together are *Sahîh al-Bukhârî*, *Sahîh Muslim*, *Sunan Abî Dâwûd*, *Sunan al-Tirmidhî*, *Sunan al-Nasâ'î*, and *Muwatta' Mâlik*. In fact, the volume of his encyclopedia devoted to Qur'ânic commentary does not contain all the hadîth that explain verses of the Qur'ân. Some of those hadîth can be found under various other relevant categories and they amount to roughly another full volume of material.

The Prophet (peace be upon him), therefore, explained a great deal of the Qur'ân. The following examples are merely illustrative:

1. Allah says: "So whoever among you is sick or suffers from an ailment on his scalp must expiate by fasting, charity, or sacrifice." [*Sûrah al-Baqarah*: 196] The phrase "fasting, charity, or sacrifice" requires further explanation. How much fasting or charity is needed and what kind of sacrifice is meant?

The Companion named Ka`b b `Ajazah narrates the following:

> I had an ailment on my scalp and I was brought to Allah's Messenger with lice crawling on my face. He said: "I did not imagine that the effort expended by you would reach the level that I have seen. Can you find a sheep?"
>
> I said to him: "No."
>
> Then the verse was revealed to "…expiate by fasting, charity, or sacrifice".
>
> He said: "Fast for three days or feed six poor people a half *sâ`*[23] of food each."[24]

In this way the Prophet (peace be upon him) explained the verse.

2. Allah says "On a day that some of your Lord's signs shall arrive, a soul shall not benefit from its faith had it not believed from afore or had earned some good from its faith." [*Sûrah al-An`âm*: 158]

Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) explained that the time being referred to is when the Sun will rise from the West. He said: "The Hour will not arrive until the Sun rises from the west. And when it rises from the west, all of humanity will believe. So on that

[23] A *sâ`* is a traditional measure of capacity roughly equivalent to the volume of four full double-handfuls of an average man when both of his hands are placed together to form a scoop. [al-Nawawî, *al-Majmû`*].
[24] *Sahîh al-Bukhârî* (1815) and *Sahîh Muslim* (1201).

day '…a soul shall not benefit from its faith had it not believed from afore or had earned some good from its faith'."[25]

3. `Uqbar b. `Âmir narrates the following:

> I heard Allah's Messenger while he was preaching behind the pulpit quote the verse: "And they prepared for them of what might you were capable of." Then he said: "Indeed, might here means firepower. Indeed, might here means firepower. Indeed might here means firepower."[26]

The Prophet (peace be upon him) explained that the "might" being referred to in the verse was the power of ranged weapons. In their day, this would mean arrows and spears. Today, it would apply to guns, missiles, and military aircraft.

4. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "No one will be put to the reckoning on the Day of Judgment save one who is doomed."

To this `Â'ishah said: "O Messenger of Allah, didn't Allah say: 'And as for him who is given his book in his right hand, he will be given an easy reckoning.'?"

The Prophet (peace be upon him) replied: "This is but a presentation of deeds. No one who has his account discussed on the Day of Judgment will be spared from punishment."[27]

In this way, the Prophet (peace be upon him) explained what the Qur'ân meant by an "easy reckoning" on the Day of Judgment. An easy reckoning was a mere enumeration of a person's deeds and sins without those sins being discussed.

5. Allah says: "Allah makes firm those who believe with a firm statement in the life of this world and in the Hereafter." [*Sûrah al-*:]

The Prophet (peace be upon him) explained this verse, saying: "When the believer is seated in his grave, he will be approached and he will testify that there is no god besides Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah. This is the meaning of His saying 'Allah makes firm those who believe with a firm statement in the life of this world and in the Hereafter'."[28]

2. Prophetic statements derived from meanings found in the Qur'ân

Sometimes the words of the Prophet (peace be upon him) come with details and elaborations upon meanings expressed in the Qur'ân. This is more subtle than what we have just finished discussing. Here we have to first look at a statement made by the

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[25] *Sahîh al-Bukhârî* (4636) and *Sahîh Muslim* (157).

[26] *Sahîh Muslim* (1917).

[27] *Sahîh al-Bukhârî* (6537) and Sahîh Muslim (6876).

[28] *Sahîh al-Bukhârî* (1369) and Sahîh Muslim (2871).

Prophet (peace be upon him) and then find the verse of the Qur'ân to which it relates. Ibn Kathîr pays considerable attention to this approach in his commentary of the Qur'ân.

Some examples of this are as follows:

1. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "A worshipper is closest to his Lord when he is prostrating."[29]

In the Qur'ân, there is a verse that indicates this meaning. Allah says: "Nay, do not obey him. Rather prostrate and draw close (to Allah)." [*Sûrah al-`Alaq*: 19]

2. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "When a man enters his house and invokes Allah's name upon entering and upon partaking of food, Satan says (to his own kind): 'You have no lodging here tonight and no dinner.' When he enters his house without invoking Allah's name upon entering, Satan says (to his own kind): 'You have found lodgings for the night.' When he fails to invoke Allah's name upon partaking of his food, Satan says: 'You have found lodgings for the night and your dinner.'"[30]

The verse of the Qur'ân that indicates this meaning is as follows: "Deter whomever you are able from among them with your words and descend upon them with your steeds and your foot soldiers and share in their wealth, their progeny, and their provision." [*Sûrah al-Isrâ'*: 64] One way that Satan can share in our wealth is by eating, drinking, and lodging with us when we forget to invoke Allah's name.

3. During the Battle of the Confederate Tribes, the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "They kept us from the middle prayer – the `Asr prayer – so may Allah fill their homes and their graves with fire."[31]

It is as if this hadîth is a direct explanation of the verse: "Safeguard your prayers and (especially) the middle prayer." [*Sûrah al-Baqarah*: 238]

There is actually another verse of the Qur'ân that indicates that the middle prayer is the `Asr prayer. Allah says: "O you who believe! Let those whom your right hands possess and those who have yet to reach maturity seek your permission three times (before entering) at the time before the dawn prayer, when you take off your clothing in the afternoon, and after the night prayer." [*Sûrah al-Nûr*: 58]

It could be that the Prophet (peace be upon him) understood from this verse of the Qur'ân that the `Asr prayer was the middle prayer, since this verse indicates that the times of prayer are reckoned to start at dawn and end at night, since Allah begins by mentioning the dawn prayer and ends by mentioning the night prayer. In this way the afternoon prayer – the `Asr prayer – becomes the middle prayer.

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[29] *Sahîh Muslim* (482).
[30] *Sahîh Muslim* (2018).
[31] *Sahîh al-Bukhârî* (6396) and *Sahîh Muslim* (627,628).

This verse is the reason why many scholars of Islamic Law and scholars of Hadîth start with the dawn prayer when they discuss the times of prayer in their writings.

4. The people of Banû Salamah were a group of the Ansâr who lived in a distant neighborhood of Madinah. When they wished to move their homes closer to the Prophet's Mosque, Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) said to them: "O Banû Salamah! Your homes record your traces."[32]

He meant by this that they should remain in their neighborhood and not think of relocating. It seems that the Prophet (peace be upon him) disliked the idea of any area of Madinah becoming vacant. He wanted to have righteous people spread throughout the land and not have them all concentrated in the vicinity of the mosque.

It could be that the Prophet (peace be upon him) understood what he said to them from Allah's words: "Indeed We shall restore life to the dead and We record what they send before them and the traces they leave behind." [*Sûrah YâSîn*: 12] These traces that they leave behind include their going to the mosque and their returning from it.

5. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "No one should touch the Qur'ân except in a state of purity."[33]

The Prophet (peace be upon him) may have derived this ruling from the following verses of the Qur'ân: "Indeed it is a noble Qur'ân, in a book well guarded which none shall touch save those who are purified; a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds." [*Sûrah al-Wâqi`ah*: 77-80]

From these verses that describe the Qur'ân, scholars have derived the ruling that it is unlawful for a person to touch the Qur'ân except in a state of ritual purity.

3. Explanation of the context in which particular verses were revealed

A person who knows the context in which a particular verse of the Qur'ân was revealed is better equipped to understand what that verse means than someone who does not. We have many examples where the Sunnah provides us with this information:

1. We have the following account related by `Urwah b. Zubayr:

> I asked `Â'ishah the following question: "Have you considered where Allah says: 'Verily Mount Safâ and Mount Marwah are among the rites of Allah. So for those who make the greater or lesser pilgrimage to the House, there is no sin upon him to compass round them.' [*Sûrah al-Baqarah*: 158] For by Allah! There is no sin upon anyone for not compassing round Safâ and Marwah."

[32] *Sahîh Muslim* (665).
[33] Al-Bayhaqî, *Shu`ab al-Îmân* (2111), al-Lâlikâ'î, *Sharh Usûl al-I`tiqâd* (572), Ibn al-Jawzî, *al-Tahqîq fî Ahâdîth al-Khilâf* (260), and al-Tabarânî, *al-Mu`jam al-Kabîr* (13217) and *al-Mu`jam al-Saghîr* (1162). This hadîth, taken with all of its chains of transmission, is of a good (*hasan*) grade.

`Â'ishah replied: "How wrong is what you have said, my nephew. If it were how you have interpreted it, then it would have read: 'there is no sin upon him to *not* compass round them.' Nevertheless, it was revealed for the inhabitants of Madinah. Before they had accepted Islam, they used to dedicate their pilgrimage to the false god Manât whom they used to worship at al-Mushallal. Those who did so considered it objectionable to then compass round al-Safâ and Marwah. So when they accepted Islam, they asked Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) about it, saying: 'O Messenger of Allah! We used to find it objectionable to compass round the area between al-Safâ and Marwah.' So Allah revealed the verse: 'Verily Mount Safâ and Mount Marwah are among the rites of Allah…'"

Then `Â'ishah said: "The Prophet (peace be upon him) established the practice of traversing the ground between the two mountains, so no one is allowed to discard the practice of traversing between them."

I then informed Abû Bakr b. `Abd al-Rahmân of this and he said to me: "There is something else that I have heard as well. For indeed I have from those possessing knowledge say that all the people – besides those mentioned by Â'ishah who used to dedicate their pilgrimage to Manât – used to compass the ground between al-Safâ and Marwah. So when Allah mentioned compassing round the House without making mention of al-Safâ and Marwah in the Qur'ân, they said: 'O Messenger of Allah! We used to compass the ground between al-Safâ and Marwah, but Allah has revealed compassing round the House without mentioning al-Safâ. So is there something wrong if we compass round them?' So Allah revealed the verse: 'Verily Mount Safâ and Mount Marwah are among the rites of Allah…'"

Then Abû Bakr b. `Abd al-Rahmân said: "I hear that this verse was revealed to both these groups of people; to those who objected to compassing between al-Safâ and Marwah in the days of ignorance as well as to those who used to do so and then thought it objectionable after accepting Islam because Allah mentioned compassing round the House without mentioning al-Safâ."[34]

From this account, we know that the verse was revealed in two different contexts. The first was to tell the inhabitants of Madinah to compass the ground between Mount al-Safâ and Mount Marwah in contrast to what they used to do before Islam when they dedicated their pilgrimage to Manât.

The second context was to tell the rest of the Muslims that they should continue to perform the circuits between al-Safâ and Marwah, even though they used to do so in the days of ignorance before Islam, since doing so is in fact one of the rites prescribed by Allah and not a custom from paganism.

By knowing the context in which this verse was revealed, we get a complete understanding of what the verse means.

2. Allah says: "It is no sin on you if you seek the bounty of your Lord. Then when you pour down from Mount `Arafât, celebrate the praises of your Lord at the sacred monument." [*Sûrah al-Baqarah*: 198]

What does it mean in this verse to "seek the bounty of your Lord"? It could mean to pray to Allah, or to glorify him, or to seek His blessings. Indeed, the verse embraces these

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[34] *Sahîh al-Bukhârî* (1643) and *Sahîh Muslim* (1277).

meanings. However, the phrase “to seek the bounty of your Lord” is also used to mean commerce and the pursuit of business.

Ibn `Abbâs relates to us the context in which this verse was revealed:

> `Ukâz, Mujannah, and Dhû al-Majâz were markets that were held in the times of ignorance. For this reason, people feared that it might be sinful to engage in trade during the season of pilgrimage. So Allah revealed the verse: “It is no sin on you if you seek the bounty of your Lord” about the pilgrimage season.[35]

From this account, we know that the verse is telling us that it is not a sin to engage in commerce during the pilgrimage.

3. Allah says: “There is a mosque whose foundation was laid from the first day on piety. It is more worthy of your observing prayer therein. In it are men who love to be purified and Allah loves those who make themselves pure.” [*Sûrah al-Tawbah*: 108]

What does this verse mean by “men who love to be purified?” Abû Hurayrah discusses the context of this verse, informing us that it was revealed about the people of Qubâ’. He says: “They used to clean their private parts with water after going to relieve themselves.”[36]

4. Allah says: “On the day that they will be dragged into the Fire on their faces (hearing): ‘Taste ye the touch of Hell.’ Indeed We have created all things in decreed measure.” [*Sûrah al-Qamar*: 48-49]

Muslims of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamâ`ah* use these verses as proof of Allah’s divine decree and that everything that happens is by Allah’ decree. However, there are those who dispute this interpretation, saying that the verse means that Allah created everything in due proportion and suitable for its place and time.

Now, there is nothing preventing this from being one aspect of the verse’s meaning. At the same time, the verse conveys the meaning that everything occurs by Allah’s decree.

This is clear from the context in which the verse was revealed. Abû Hurayrh relates:

That the pagan tribesmen of Quraysh came to Allah’s Messenger (peace be upon him) and started to dispute with him about divine decree, so the verse was revealed: “On the day that they will be dragged into the Fire on their faces (hearing): ‘Taste ye the touch of Hell.’ Indeed We have created all things in decreed measure.” [*Sûrah al-Qamar*: 48-49][37]

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[35] *Sahîh al-Bukhârî* (4519).
[36] *Sunan Abî Dâwûd* (45), *Sunan al-Tirmidhî* (3100), and *Sunan Ibn Mâjah* (357).
[37] *Sahîh Muslim* (2656).

4. Explanation of the Qur'ân by way of practical example

A contemporary Muslim scholar, when asked about the commentary of the Qur'ân, made the astute observation that "the best commentary that exists on the Qur'ân is the biography of the Prophet (peace be upon him), because the Prophet's life – through his sayings, actions, and tacit approvals – was a practical expression of the Qur'ân."

This is why `Â'ishah, when asked to describe her husband's character, said: "The character of the Prophet (peace be upon him) was the Qur'ân."[38]

Likewise, Jâbir said, while describing how the Prophet (peace be upon him) performed pilgrimage, said: "Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) was with us and the Qur'ân was being revealed to him. He knew its meaning, and whatever he did, we followed him in doing it."[39] Jâbir was here speaking generally about the pilgrimage and all other matters.

The following are a few examples of how the Prophet's practice explains the Qur'ân:

1. The prayer of the Prophet (peace be upon him) is an excellent example. He commanded his followers: "Pray as you've seen me praying."[40] In this way, all of the Prophet's prayers are an explanation for Allah's words in the Qur'ân: "Establish prayer."

2. His pilgrimage is another good example. The Prophet (peace be upon him) performed the pilgrimage and carried out all of its rites. He commanded his followers, saying: "Take form me your pilgrimage rites."[41] Everything that the Prophet (peace be upon him) did on his pilgrimage came as an explanation of Allah's words: "Pilgrimage to the House is a duty that people owe to Allah." [*Sûrah Al `Imrân*: 97]

3. In the same way, the Prophet (peace be upon him) taught the people how to fast by his own practical example. His actions explained to them how to understand the verse: "Fasting has been prescribed for you…" [*Sûrah al-Baqarah*: 183]

4, The Prophet (peace be upon him) showed us the various rates that must be paid for Zakâh, and in doing so provided us a practical explanation of the verse: "And pay the Zakâh." [*Sûrah al-Baqarah*: 43]

5. A more specific example is the explanation of the verse: "Establish prayer at the Sun's decine until the darkness of the night, and the morning recitation, for the morning recitation is witnessed." [*Sûrah al-Isrâ'*: 78]

This verse gives the timeframe for the five daily prayers. A person has asked the Prophet (peace be upon him) about the times of prayer and the Prophet (peace be upon him) did

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[38] *Sahîh Muslim* (746).
[39] *Sahîh al-Bukharî* (1651) and *Sahîh Muslim* (1218).
[40] *Sahîh al-Bukharî* (631) and *Sahîh Muslim* (674).
[41] *Sahîh Muslim* (1777) and *Sunan al-Bayhaqî* (9307).

not tell him anything. Then he performed the dawn prayer with the people at the crack of dawn when it was still so dark that people could hardly make out one another's features. He prayed the noon prayer with them just as the Sun began to decline from its zenith so that someone commented: "It is still high noon." He led the afternoon prayer while the Sun was still quite high in the sky. He prayed the sunset prayer as soon as the Sun had dipped below the horizon. He performed the night prayer as soon as the red glow of dusk faded from the sky.

On the next day, the Prophet (peace be upon him) delayed the morning prayer so long that someone commented after the prayer was finished that the Sun was practically rising. Then he delayed the noon pray until it was almost the time he had performed the afternoon prayer on the previous day. He prayed the afternoon prayer so late that after the prayer was finished, someone commented that the Sun's color had turned red. Then he delayed the sunset prayer until the ruddy glow of sunset had almost faded from the sky. Then he delayed the night prayer until a third of the night had passed.

On the following day, he summoned the questioner and said: "The times for the prayers are between the times that I prayed them.[42]

6. In the Qur'ân, Allah describes the circuits that the pilgrims perform between Safâ' and Marwah by saying: "Verily Mount Safâ and Mount Marwah are among the rites of Allah. So for those who make the greater or lesser pilgrimage to the House, there is no sin upon him to compass round them." [*Sûrah al-Baqarah*: 158]

This verse shows us that performing this act is not prohibited. It also gives an indication that it is not obligatory to do so. However, when the Prophet (peace be upon him) performed this rite during his pilgrimage, he demonstrated its obligatory nature. This is why `Â'ishah said: "Allah will never accept as complete a greater or lesser pilgrimage from a person who does not walk the circuits between Safâ' and Marwah."[43]

From these examples, we can see that all of the Prophet's words and deeds were an explanation of the Qur'ân. The great jurist al-Shâfi`î observed: "Everything ruling that Allah's Messenger gave a came from his understanding of the Qur'ân."[44]

We need to know that the Qur'ân and Sunnah are inseparable and that it is impossible for us to understand the Qur'ân except in light of the Sunnah.

May Allah grant us understanding of His Book and bless us to act according to it. And may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon our prophet Muhammad and upon the Prophet's family and Companions.

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[42] *Sahîh Muslim* (614).
[43] *Sahîh al-Bukharî* (1790) and *Sahîh Muslim* (1277).
[44] Refer to *al-Itqân* (2/467).